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The Consumer Asks for Facts on Furs

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

A dialogue between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. Howard Zahniser, Bureau of Biological Survey, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Friday, December 11, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY: As usual, this is conservation day on the Farm and Home Hour. In the Department of Agriculture period we're approaching it from rather a different angle than usual. Ruth Van Deman is here with Howard Zahniser to join with him in a discussion of fur resources.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, Morse, if you weren't so polite you'd say I horned my way in.

MR. SALISBURY: Not at all, Ruth, the consumer has a right to be heard.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well it's chiefly to ask questions this time. The fact of the matter is I'm here because I turned listener to the Farm and Home Hour one Friday in November. I happened to be at home that day, and I heard Mr. Zahniser telling what the Bureau of Biological Survey is doing to conserve fur resources. It occurred to me that since we women are the chief wearers of furs, we might exert a more intelligent influence on conservation if we knew more about the furs themselves. So I called Mr. Zahniser up the next day and asked him to let me put my questions to him so you could hear the answers. He being a very obliging gentleman consented, so here we are.

MR. ZAHNISER: Well, Miss Van Deman, you don't have to apologize. We're glad to have the consumer viewpoint injected into our fur resources work. And besides, you know it isn't just women who are interested in furs, especially at this time of year. When I opened the paper this morning I saw a very catchy advertisement -- a picture of a swagger fur coat and the caption "Only 12 more shopping days until Christmas". Right near the financial page, too.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Oh yes, it would need be. And maybe you didn't notice that I was careful to speak of women as the chief wearers of furs. I didn't say a word about buyers.

Mr. ZAHNISER: Oh, oh -- leaving the door open for Santa Claus.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Wide open. But maybe even Santa Claus could use a few facts about furs. For instance, where can a person get unbiased information about furs as sold in retail stores? Has there been any real research on wearing qualities? Are there any reliable buying guides?

MR. ZAHNISER: Wait a minute, now! Three questions straight in a row, and I'll have to answer every one of them with a YES, and a NO. A few things have been published giving what you might call consumer information on furs. The fur trade itself has worked up a kind of pocket dictionary of names and

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terms, and has designated the serviceability of the different kinds of furs as good, fair, or low. Some research is going on, but I believe most of the ratings so far come out of common experience, rather than from actual studies of the comparative wearing qualities.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Quite a help, even so.

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, and so is the attempt to bring order out of chaos in fur names. Furs are called all sorts of fancy things. For instance, our bulletin on rabbit production gives 58 trade names applied to rabbit pelts alone, like Arctic seal, Baltic lion, electric beaver, French sable, and Russian leopard -- not to mention cony, the German word for rabbit ---

MISS VAN DEMAN: And lapin, the French?

MR. ZAHNISER: Oh yes, lapin, as most of us say it, is one of the commonest names for sheared dyed rabbit.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I suppose rabbit by any other name is just as warm. And maybe a little more salable.

MR. ZAHNISER: Quite so. Rabbit is a very useful, low-priced fur, some of it from animals grown definitely for the purpose. It's just that people ought to know what they're getting.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Didn't the Federal Trade Commission try to put a stop to misleading names for furs? Seems to me I've heard about trade agreements in the fur business.

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, the Federal Trade Commission is still working with the fur people. Together they've developed a system of describing and labeling furs. For one thing, the last word of the description must be the correct name of the fur. Perhaps you've seen ads of "seal-dyed muskrat" or "beaver-dyed cony."

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, I've seen some of those, and I must say that I had to think twice before I figured out just what they meant. All the same I know they're a step in the right direction.

MR. ZAHNISER: And according to this agreement, all furs shaded, or blended, tipped, dyed, or pointed must be described as such, for example as "black-dyed fox", or "pointed fox."

MISS VAN DEMAN: Pointed fox, then, doesn't grow that way?

MR. ZAHNISER: No, it's generally red fox or some other light colored fox dyed black or a dark shade. To point it, skilled workers glue long, white hairs into it to imitate natural silver fox.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Silver fox is just too popular, I guess. They don't grow fast enough even on the fur farms.

MR. ZAHNISER: But it's a good thing that we have the fur farms. Our wild animals are never going to supply all the furs we are going to need in the future. And that's true, not only of silver foxes, but of furs in general.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I've wondered about the future fur supply. I was afraid that our wild animals wouldn't hold out indefinitely.

MR. ZAHNISER: It's a good thing that you have that fear. We have good grounds, though, for hoping that we can maintain our fur animals in the wild. Some species -- like the marten, the otter, and the fisher -- are so scarce now that we ought to quit taking them for a while, but we can still continue to take most of the other pelts, if we handle the resource wisely.

MISS VAN DEMAN: "Wisely" is a broad word. You mean not to take too many animals in any one year and to protect the young.

MR. ZAHNISER: That's right. Also trapping should be restricted to the seasons when the pelts are in prime condition, so that none will be wasted. And, large areas of our lands should be given back to the furbearers, and then managed for an annual crop.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Like the muskrat marshes?

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, they are a good example of wise land use.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Would you call that fur farming?

MR. ZAHNISER: Well, it is in a sense, but actual fur farming is carried on with animals in captivity. Both are essential. That is why the Biological Survey is carrying on studies to find out more economical methods for fur farmers.

MISS VAN DEMAN: But you aren't suggesting that people go into fur farming unless they have a thorough knowledge of the risks and methods, are you?

MR. ZAHNISER: We certainly are not. Fur farming is not a get-rich-quick business, as some people think. It's no easy job to handle wild animals in captivity, or to feed them. Why, THE MEAT BILL is a considerable item. The Survey is trying to learn more about the habits of fur animals in captivity, but it's slow business with some of the species, and they are all more or less shy. And we're trying also to find substitutes for the meat, and develop less expensive feed rations.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Diet on the fur farm. That is a new kind of consumer problem.

MR. ZAHNISER: Part of the problem of the consumer of furs, all the same. Everyone who is interested in the future of our fur animals, whether as a purchaser, a fur-trader, or a wildlife conservationist, should realize these needs for a wise management of our fur resources. And, thanks a lot, Miss Van Deman, for another opportunity to say a word for wildlife conservation.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well, thank you, too, Mr. Zahniser, for your suggestions on furs to the consumer; and to Santa Claus if he happens to be listening in.

MR. SALISBURY: And thank you both. Ladies and gentlemen, you have just been listening to Miss Ruth Van Deman of the Bureau of Home Economics and Howard Zahniser of the Bureau of Biological Survey discussing facts about furs and fur-animal conservation.